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RETURN TO WATER

by

Todd G. Frederickson

B.A., Moorhead State University, 1985

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

University of Montana

1988

Approved by

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A C K N O W L E D G E M E N T S

"Lake Spirit" first appeared in The Greenfield Review.

for Louie and Inie, Kim, and Mom and Dad

". . .they who are on the water enjoy a longer and brighter twilight than they who are on land, for here the water, as well as the atmosphere, absorbs and reflects the light, and some of the day seems to have sunk down into the waves."

--Henry David Thoreau

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I.

"During the many hours which we spend in this waking sleep, the hand stands still on the face of the clock, and we grow like corn in the night."

--Henry David Thoreau

GROWING SEASON IN THE BERKSHIRE HILLS

Morning means a return
to water, to small trout
and the damp wings of insects
they pluck down. To steam
rising in thin white ringlets.

I imagine a human, imagine her
beautiful, fuzzy from sleep.
She disrobes on the sandy patch of shore
and walks into mountain-cold water.
Salamander efts pull their red
bodies over her numb feet.

We watch this hill change
like the moon in an owl's eye.
The pace of flowers: first, Indian
paintbrushes, smoldering
in a smudge of green; later, wild buttercup;
red clover; wild carrot.
Our feet learn soft moss
from hardtack. The direction
dry grasses point. A different path home.

Spirits in these woods take
animal shapes. Two beavers
finding the pond one night
cut willow and aspen saplings,
submerge them in the stream. Their tails
curl like tire rubber
and splat down on rising water.
Those spirits keep three dogs at bay
for two solid days. They drain
pride from them, pull hairy tails limp.
Steal voices.

(stanza break)

Each night, we walk further
into firefly fields, breathe
a deeper aroma: dew cooling the hemlock;
corn sinking its roots; the smell
of a hill changing.
We see spirits shrink and baffle
pale green wings against windowglass.

Soon, the woman disappears
down the road's gritty edges, her tracks
mixing with those of yearling deer.
I feed spirits the dense
sliver of our final moon,
cultivate longing for fog.

THE ADOLESCENT WATCHES SUCKERS SPAWNING

This spring,
my timing is clear
as theirs.

They begin before dawn,
filtering out of the
muddy bottom areas, the deep,
into the creek's shallow mouth,
cold gravel
raked by current.

Daylight spooks them.
They are startled by barn swallows
daubing and darting beneath the bridge,
by a gangly mongrel
breaking the surface with its
morning wade. By a pebble
tumbled in. Rings.

I have a spear.

Slowly, they regroup. One,
another, their gray heads
forming like clay in the shadows,
marbled by the movement of water.
They move in and turn against current.

I watch a laden
female and two smaller males,
lateral lines on line,
the momentary churning,
shudder, the way they
shoot apart. . . .

Killing,
lining the spear
behind a lucid head
through flesh and backbone,
one feels a different quivering
settle, like milt, over stone.

ELEGY FOR AUGUST GORDON

Your name. My grandparents spoke it
when they talked of walleye,
deer seasons, that hollow
near the lake, behind a line of looming
balsams.

The antique collectors had been waiting,
crossing your days from their calendars.
Ponto Tillie drove all the way from Pontoria
to claim as her own the stoneware jugs,
kerosene lamps, carpenter tools you lost
in dirt and sawdust.
They gutted your shack
but left the bearhide outside.
I feared how it sagged the wire
clothesline to the ground.

Your closest neighbors have begun
loosening words. They mention the woman,
stern and foreign, the purchased ring
and the sureness with which
her sinew-thin fingers
flicked pale gold into snakegrass.

Now, sumac huddle inside your home,
spilling their quiet conversation
into the yard. Everywhere red, knobby velvet.

On the lake, I watched your cedarstrip boat
slowly warp near shore, take on water
and lower itself into muck.

August, did you ever watch the giant redhorse
lumber along bottom mud? When the sky grew
hazy and sickly yellow before a storm,
did you know why the tullibeas rise
from deep water? Even dead they are sleek,
silver and clean. Perhaps you too
knew the safe distance the lake gives--
the distance from which a boy
can make you live forever.

GRAMPA LOUIE AND I
AND ANOTHER FISHLESS NIGHT
ON LAKE WABEDO

Fish with careful jaws
take our lines, carry them
over open water
and let them descend.
We set our hooks,
but their mouths are not there.

Smell of gasoline, cold minnows on our hands.
Shiners scraping inside the metal pail,
so delicate--their papery scales
pinch and flake from my palm.
The minnowpail grates against
the aluminum side, translating
the motion of waves.

Old fishermen give up slowly.
They troll the shore's contour,
going to the next point,
then the next, a limp thread of blue
exhaust trailing behind each motor.
In sleep they remember
how good things were
thirty years ago, when fish always bit.
Things were obvious then, like a
big pike nailing a chub.

We watch a blue heron
make one last pass over each boat.
Louie has always called it "Aunt Bessie,"
without knowing where the name
came from. He breaks the necks of scrawny perch,
maybe saves some gut for emergency bait,
and tosses the rest to her. The long bird
turns each fish in her beak, swallows it
head-first down.
Away from the lake, in spruce swamps,
she regurgitates the food
for scaly young.

(stanza break)

At his small kitchen table,
Louie pours boiling water over our
coffee crystals, and brings out the jar of
brown cookies. His stories I've heard many times.
In every one
the fish return, lumbering through memory,
through the dim light one might see
when far under waves.
Their bony jaws clamp around brass hooks.

Tomorrow, we decide,
we will go again.

GRAMMA INIE AND THE BEAR

She's been up since five. In the utility room where the
 hand
 wringer stands, she cranks the week's laundry into stiff,
 damp
 sheets. She carries the baskets up the steps, up the hill,
 to where a wire coated with green plastic is strung between
 basswood and maple.
 Inie knows her laundry, knows it'll dry as soon as the
 breeze
 picks up off the lake like it always does, and billows the
 clothes.
 She knows the feel of wood clothespins, the smell of bleach
 on dry hands,
 the sound a hand wringer makes.

Inie pinches clothespins onto Louie's thin, baggy underwear.
 She doesn't hear the cracking of sticks and leaves, the
 sluggish
 weight breaking decayed wood. It will not concern her until
 it is visible, until it is right in front of her, like
 laundry
 needing hanging. The bear, old and large, will enter
 forty ft. away, a snout, lumbering shoulders,
 a tucked rump.

Now, you become Inie. You're 71 years old, and will tell
 anyone that.
 You met Louie when you were sixteen, ran a trapline
 to pay for the wedding dress. That may well be your first
 story.
 You remember another, that your brother Jack, the game warden
 at Moose Lake,
 found a cub yowling in a small tree, sowless, and raised it.
 You remember him wrestling with the bear when it was half
 grown.
 You remember eating bear meat once, when Mrs. Farley
 pulled it from a Ball jar, not telling you what it was.
 Had you known, you say, you wouldn't have eaten it;
 bear lack the cloven hoof. You'll never tell anyone,
 but it was good, the flesh tender, the rancid fat trimmed.

(stanza break)

Now, you are the bear. You've spent the night searching behind cabins for garbage--buried fish guts, poultry bones, muskmelon rinds. In this dry year, raspberry bushes have no fruit. The day brightens and crowds around you, shouting you don't belong. In the brush you are safe, but it ends ahead, in a grassy clearing with trees. Large white objects bend like leaves in the breeze, a human tugging at their corners.

Now, you are the moment, the point when woman and bear intersect,
 a story being made. You are a grandchild recounting the incident years later,
 seeing your mother's mother look up from her work, seeing the bear's snout notice human odor and swinging fabric.
 Inie doesn't move; you've been told she wasn't afraid. You wait for the bear. Will it feel confronted, growl deep at her?
 No, you're told. It doesn't. Instead, you hear Inie lower her voice:

Git! Your grandmother is yelling at a black bear. Git! The bear runs faster than you believed bears could, down the steep bank, across the county road, through tall sow-thistle and horseradish, disappearing forever into the brush.

The story is retold whenever a bear is mentioned. Even after her mind begins slipping years later, like an unstaked trap,
 Inie will remember the bear that came out of nowhere on laundry day,
 the one she scared away "a couple years ago." You'll wait for a bear
 to stop on the road in front of you, or look up from trash at the landfill, just stand there, staring back. The moment won't change. No, it will not change.

MILLE LACS ICE

A mile out, the icehouses huddle over rock reefs.
 On cloudless days, the air dangerously sharp and clear
 as thin ice, you can see their flecks of color
 dancing and rolling like a distant blizzard--
 reds, gaudy greens, tarpaper black--anything
 to separate themselves from winter.

The names of lakeside towns tell all
 you need to know--that Isle has land in its sleepy bay;
 that Malmo means Swedes, and Wahkon means Indians.
 Louie, my grandfather, grew up on the Malmo end. He saw
 the town
 extend its roads onto the lake every winter.
 He remembers pulling an icehouse on runners, a time
 before snowmobiles buzzed and whined in straight
 single-file lines, their high-pitched engines angry
 inside each metal carapace.

Louie tells of a huge man who crossed the ice many years ago.
 The snow in the surrounding woods was deep that year,
 and timber wolves moved onto the open, frozen plain.
 There, perceptions become more distinct--the man
 heard howling split into three discrete animals, twelve paws
 crunching through shallow, wind-packed drifts.
 His mind had already met the animals a hundred times,
 the ending of each scene nervous and vague. He realized
 his hands had been clenching, pressing
 tight against the rough seams inside his mitts.
 When they surrounded him, the giant weaponless man
 let the scrawniest one clamp onto his buckskin mitt
 stiffened by the cold. It was a thick hand, a mythic hand
 that wrapped around the snow-matted muzzle, clenched again,
 and swung behind a working arm.
 When the wolf hit the ice, its neck was broken.
 The man lived.

(stanza break)

The icehouses are around me now. One of their narrow doors
slivers open, expels an eelpout onto the snowy flat. The
fish's
long brown body loses its clumsiness to frost. It has left
dense water,
passed through five feet of ice, through the slushy hole and
the dim
cramped room where men hunker in silence.
Inside, as a boy, Louie might have tasted his first whiskey,
the acrid burn that made the icehouse's black interior
warmer and soft. He might have gazed at his first
pin-up, using seclusion to probe every curve, the page
clammy and smooth in his fingers. Once,
he might have awakened and seen a giant pike, a murky
four-ft. shadow
eclipsing the hole, and his own spindly reflection over it,
groping for footing.

This is where the day ends. Chippewa boys
gather the discarded eelpouts, stack them
into each other's arms like cold kindling,
and carry them home to clean. As the red afternoon sun
slips into these fifteen flat miles, fishermen
remember their lives on frozen ground.
They head home with the cold in their joints, imagining water
becoming ice below them.

II.

"With our heads so low in the grass, we heard the river whirling and sucking, and lapsing downward, kissing the shore as it went, sometimes rippling louder than usual, and again its mighty current making only a slight limpid trickling sound, as if our water-pail had sprung a leak, and the water were flowing into the grass by our side."

--Henry David Thoreau

WHILE CANOEING THE RED LAKE RIVER
 NEAR GOODRIDGE, MINNESOTA,
 WE SPEAK OF DIRECTION

On its way to the Dakota border, this river
 staggers through grids of hardening grain, field corn
 and sunflower, merges with the muddier Thief,
 Badger and Black before heading north to Canada.

We speak of bent willow and goldenrod,
 the inevitability of downstream. We speak
 a language of airborne seeds, a delicate geometry
 floating over the plowed black clods.

Bubbles swirl past,
 sticky on the water. A fray of snarled weeds. The slow
 current catches us, swings us wide around
 into wild rice, nudges the bow against the soft bank.

When we speak, we speak of growth in wheat,
 flow in river. What is most abstract is between
 us. Our words tangle there, and scrape.

We leave bulrush
 and blue gentian, and continue drifting. The riverbottom
 rises and falls, its bristle-red weeds combing silence
 like a mollusk's foot. Looking down into the water,
 I wonder what is actually moving; we seem snagged
 while the weeds, unanchored, roll downstream.

Occasionally, a pile of beaver sticks, cleaned white,
 on the bottom. The large rodents have eaten
 what they needed to get through winter. I love their
 tangible efforts: the bare sticks, the mounded lodge,
 the woven dams. The half-cut popple
 notched to fall riverward.

(stanza break)

Wheat and corn revolve around us.
We think we are the center, that we have placed ourselves here.
That because of us, brown mallards panic from cattails,
that the rice surrounds us, rustling its ripe
maroon heads against the canoe.

In this silver slot
amid green, our abstractions are carried away by the water
the way a hawk glides and turns, effortless
over fallow fields. The way a lover, leaving,
can imagine the same river many miles upstream
and find it much more beautiful there.

FREEZING ON THE FLOOR OF JOHN BJORK'S MIGRANT CABIN
 BEHIND THE CORN CANNERY IN COKATO, MINNESOTA

Damn you always were hard to wake! Years ago, when we were
 roommates,
 your clock radio woke me in my bedroom before it woke you
 in yours, the alarm
 loud enough to possess and distort the music. Tonight,
 silence freezes everything.
 The frost seeps up through the planks, into the mattress
 you set on the floor for me,
 steals my body's feeble attempt at heat. The extra sweaters
 and dirty clothes I've spread and jammed into my creases
 save little. The night passes too slowly. I can locate
 zones of loss,
 heat leaving my forehead, the thin-skinned tops of my feet.
 When I move, what I've nurtured into the mattress leaves me.
 Yet I will not wake you for blankets.

Earlier, you showed me the cannery--the outdated conveyor's
 million
 metal wheels; the room where corn is canned raw then cooked
 in giant
 pressurized vats; where you stir corn starch, water, sugar,
 and salt
 into "cream style" sixty hours a week, and have jet-spray
 fights
 with guys you've known since high school. You told about
 coming off
 graveyard shift sopping wet, seeing three deer grazing in the
 field
 beyond the migrant cabins, how you stood there watching them,
 your body
 steaming like the grass the deer moved through.

(stanza break)

I imagine you during those off-shifts, driving the county
roads
between Dassel, Hutchinson, and Howard Lake. You shift your
pickup down
at that ninety-degree turn, where there used to be a town--
a mercantile,
a clutch of farms among the corn, even a brick school. Maybe
you try
remembering what it was like before the foreclosures, before
your parents
died in a car. You remember the families gathered on the
green
Lutheran lawn--the men, silent and preoccupied; the women
wanting
to comfort you, feed you; the children becoming their parents.

I imagine myself warm, on a late night, in mid-August perhaps.
I'm driving Patti home to Eden Prairie after our visit with
you.
She must work early in the morning, so sleeps beside me,
my jean jacket wrapped around her shoulders.
Along Hwy. 12, long rows of sweet corn regain their turgor.
Dew condenses on their sharp velvet leaves. The green Nova's
windows
are half open, letting the evening's humidity in.
Remember that basement apartment we rented in Moorhead?
The one with the green lightbulbs? There, I realized I
didn't love her.
As it dissolved, I noticed the two of you grow closer, and
liked it.
I remember seeing her on the back of your motorcycle, content,
and that goddamned
grin of yours that made my guilt slide away.

Patti has kept us in touch. I wrote her from the co-op house
in Eugene,
from Syracuse where I'd followed another woman, and from
western Massachusetts
where I worked on a Unitarian minister's farm. She reported
hazy information
on your survival training in the Cascades, the treeplanting
fiasco
in the Georgia pines, picking Florida oranges for gas money,
and your most recent dream of self-sufficiency in the
Ozarks.

(stanza break)

In a couple hours, you'll wake up, shuffle naked out of bed,
crank the butane stove for heat. I'll watch you put on
yesterday's pants,
leave the cabin to piss, imagine you scanning the hayfield
for deer.
In the homes of Cokato, Catholics and Lutherans will ready
themselves
for church. Driving to a restaurant for pancakes and coffee,
we'll see them
driving slow, their windows up. The waitress, a girl who
hasn't yet left town,
will know you. She is pretty, keeps refilling our coffees.
With you,
her voice sounds tender and real. I want to know her, know
what she believes in,
what she wants to think out loud on the back of your cycle
gliding down to The Cities for the day.

The day is warm and blue. I must drive home, northwest to
Moorhead.
I'll favor backroads, ones that square the cornfields or
surprise me
when they find a farm pond. I'll notice killdeer coasting
low over plowed fields,
clouds of brown birds billowing around dairy cattle, a lone
egret frozen for frogs
on the edge of each pond. Dour Lutherans, driving.
When I enter small towns, many things--time and love, and
loneliness--
will seem unfocused, undefined. But I'll remember the names
of towns, the car's motion,
the egret, and seeing you again. I'll be happy,
as I usually am while driving,
the sun warming my forearms on the wheel.

YVONNE, CARNELIAN, AMONG FLOWERS

Yvonne, I wanted pastels blooming
lavender in my lungs, the sensuous pushings
and pullings of paint. I wanted you
to show me brushes worn to a nub, the knife
for cutting viridian onto canvas.

When we fled Eugene--you to Portland, me
to Syracuse--your drawings were big blotchy flowers
filling the paper, brilliant purples, yellows and orange
that defied the delicacy of petals.

I sent letters on the backs of my poems,
nocturnes with warm rivers in them, lightning bugs,
fish spawning in clear streams, their eyes
milky through rising steam.

I held you once, after a lover left you
pregnant and alone. My fingers furrowed through
your thick black hair, wondered how it spread
over the canvas of his chest,
felt the weight and breadth of your head
washed in evening ultramarine and magenta.

A year later, the world drained me gray.
I let people around me
kill me. I wanted Eugene again, where confidence
was waxy green.

Passing through Portland, I lost myself on winding
suburban streets. When you run, streets don't help.
They don't light the right way, or keep rain
off the windshield. It was dark when I found a phone booth
outside a Beaverton 7-11.

(stanza break)

You sounded surprised to hear my voice, a tinge of hesitation.
A breakdown had returned you to your parents' house.
In that wet phone booth, lost in a suburb, I saw,
for the first time, colors running together.

They drowned our naive world--me, searching for a bright
blotch,
a field of distinct flowers; you, challenging your palette
to vibrancy, never to turn muddy. We tried to make sense
through the rain-soaked glass of a phone booth,
from the order of your parents' home.

Now, I want you to know, I have begun painting,
squeezing carnelian from a fresh tube.
I coat you with it, place you in an emerald field in Eugene
among cherry and plum. Their flowers fade beside you.

STOPPING ALONG HIGHWAY 5 NORTH OF HOLYOKE, MASSACHUSETTS,
TO SEE DINOSAUR TRACKS

I want dinosaurs. I want 160 million
years ago. A flock of Eubrontes
crossing the river there, stalking Jurassic food
amid steamy ferns and stone volcanically warm.

A constant line of cars
streams against us. Just
let me drive slow, pat the dog's nervous
cowering head. Let me
stroke the inside of your thigh.

I pull the blue Nova off the road,
and we walk down the bank to the Connecticut.
Here, signs of former life:
a gum wrapper; soggy cardboard; an empty
Bud Light; the cool
aqua label from a pack of Newports.

Several fishermen are casting into the river--
sunned, stubby men who make small talk dance
from their fleshy mouths
like the spoons they fling.
They enjoy your innocent
interest in what they do, your mind's
clean river, filled with running shad.

Finally, on an angled rock slab, three
three-toed tracks, all heading for higher ground,
leading right under the highway.
Our hands flop easily inside each one
while cars keep whooshing by above us.
But still no dinosaurs. None
of their drunken menthol smoke.
You, me, and the dog
piss, then leave.

(stanza break)

Traveling home, you write down words in my journal:
Fishermen. Newports. Cardboard. Bud. Dinosaur tracks.

Today I stumbled upon that page in my journal again,
its familiar, alien handwriting.
Though months have passed since our last letters,
you still make me think of dinosaurs
hiding from us, parking their old
Cadillacs along remote roadsides
and slowly smoking themselves into oblivion.

I do not remember everything.
That precise millisecond
when the last of a species dies
and extinction begins is rarely
imprinted in stone. All I really know
is this:
I drive alone these days, fast
through the red rock canyons of Montana.
I find you much too often,
and my ashtrays are full.

ALONE IN TWO SUNRISES

The night I
stayed up, trying to write,
making the woodstove roar
with extraneous words
pacing the hot cabin
A night when pursuit couldn't sleep

Near five thirty, my fires
became cold ash
but the budding woods began
crackling with hidden birds
I watched a shallow crimson plate
shatter through black-trunked trees

*

The night you
swollen with ghosts
asked to sleep with me
in my cabin, and I agreed
I tossed hot, cold
guilty for no longer
wanting you

At five, my window
became conscience, bloated
taunting and yellow
while you remained asleep
your needs falsely met

THE WRITER, THE ARTIST, AND THEIR ASCENSION
UP THE NORTH SHORE OF LAKE SUPERIOR

The first night, we rented a room at the Cascade Hotel in Duluth, realizing our nights would soon become unfamiliar gravel. Nothing matched. The wool blankets were green and rough; the polyester bedspread held its purple and orange flowers too well. Lightbulbs the shape of candle flames glowed amber from every other socket. From our metal bed the next morning, we watched gulls sail between buildings. I felt your back bead with sweat as the sun strung heat through our window. Inside the clawfoot tub with its tall plastic curtain, we rubbed a bar of Ivory over each other's cooling body, the bathroom ceiling so high, the hexagonal-tiled floor so far below.

Driving up the shore, we kept our heads lakeward, watching the horizon float toward us, then subside. A big lake can do that. We forgot how mist forms between us and the distant shore, how the earth curves. We mistook vaporous sky for Wisconsin. With each new mile I could feel something change. I was that much further from what I knew. Knife River; Two Harbors; Castle Danger-- we had to rely on each other. At Tettegouche, we walked inland along the Baptism River to High Falls. The river, plummeting toward the lake, slashed through solid maroon rock, quelled itself momentarily in an aspen amphitheater with pebble islands. We climbed to the top of the falls and lay there, the thunder too great to capture with words or pencil lines.

(stanza break)

That night, on the edge of Grand Marais harbor, with our tent pitched on round red gravel, we clung together, a knot more comfortable than I thought possible. I was convinced we controlled our own destiny. By morning, the harbor was ours--the rock jetty with its speckled gull eggs, the teetery lighthouse, the granite sea wall. I watched you sketch. You were so determined to recreate the entire harbor from spindly point to point. I wrote about fat gulls hovering around the fishhouse, screeching over fish guts, and how they bobbed like crumpled paper on the azure we could see deeply into. How they soiled the seawall's mica flecks.

We talked about returning someday, after you'd had several exhibitions and my third book had sold well. We talked about starting an art colony, skiing the Sawtooth Mountains with obedient silver-eyed dogs. Our ideas were big and good, like a clean bay. When I think of you now, I want to carve through solid rock. I want to be divebombed by mother gulls while high above a harbor, looking down at the giant shards that have left the cliffs and fallen to the bottom. If ever we were to return to each other, I believe we could live forever, floating north along Lake Superior's sharp edge, exploring each other like strange Canadian shoreline.

TALISMANS

I feared you,
 so sent a postcard of Fred Astaire in mid-leap, luxurious,
 his smirk
 sure of landing. On the back, all I could say was, "There's
 too much to say,"
 sign erratic initials, a Tao symbol, and tape a recent photo
 of me
 backdropped by Hellgate Canyon and the cold Clark Fork over
 the writing.
 I wanted you to know that rivers and mountains remained
 important,
 that I'd become handsome again. I mailed it before thinking
 too long.

You've written back,
 and I'm more aware of what I cannot yet tell. I sink words
 into objects, speak through them. This spring, Missoula
 explodes with lilacs.
 Every home, it seems, has a hedge of them--aromatic lavender,
 white,
 and fuschia spires that widen property lines, single bushes
 blocking sidewalks. I pick every shade, bring them home
 wind-blown
 on my bicycle, spread them over my bed to dry. Gradually,
 the stems
 give up their moisture. I strip them of crispened flowers,
 grind a fragrant purple dust that pours into an envelope
 like sand.

You wrote from northern Minnesota,
 from the basement in Thief River Falls where you tied sticks
 into hive-shaped structures, hung black string inside them.
 You'd learned how to make cord from old milkweed stalks.
 I received one in Oregon; it was short, darkened by your
 oils.
 I pictured you skiing along the riverbank with your dog
 named after rain,
 searching for the organic fibers to crack and roll smooth
 between your worn fingers.

(stanza break)

You worried that I wouldn't return,
that I'd fall in love with your younger sister and the
Pacific.
When she and I touched, I wanted her to be you, wanted her
complexion
to become yours, cool, difficult to tan. That spring, I
walked
along the coast, wound the ropes of bull kelp around my waist
for strength, let them dry with sand onto my jeans.
I remember waking. The morning surf had smashed a
thick-walled shell,
ground the fragments smooth, and left them in my hand like
teeth.
In tidal pools, mint-green sea anemones bloomed, their
tentacles
fanning the water for food. Orange starfish pushed
themselves into crevices.
I licked the clear salt water off my skin, enjoying the taste
of you watching me.

Now, in Montana, the raw materials
have changed. I hang a clay bead from leather, a bead whose
glaze
resembles light hitting water--rippling blue off the surface,
penetrating the brown blades of weeds, sinking into deep
green rays.
I wrap copper wire around the seared leather strip,
let it tarnish. This I do for myself, strong protection
against a ghost I conjure and love.

III.

"Methinks my own soul must be a bright invisible green."

--Henry David Thoreau

DURING AN EVENING WALK IN CUMMINGTON, MASSACHUSETTS,
 CECILE AND I SPACE OUT ON THE MOON

Steam has settled
 in the rills the road leads us through
 Smell of wet stones
 road-shoulder trickle

Cecile is smoking a cigarette The orange ember
 swings with her hand, up, glows
 Her lips part
 blow smoke, air
 out

Small square fields
 lend us their dark borders
 In the evening one can hear
 wood floors creaking
 beneath the stiff feet of farmers
 maples moving along fencelines
 pastures where sheep
 panic
 from our gravel-kicking

 Heavy night air tangy sweet
 with lilac sheep shit
 fog
 the bleating from barns

We come to a field full moon
 high tide of hay
 Our shadows root around like buffalo

To space out in a Berkshire pasture
 is to let your eyes
 mold the moon into memory
 faces amorphous grays
 the eye pits cheekbones of a lover

(stanza break)

Something, Cecile

Something falling
Something with water with swimming
with you wordless
 in this sea

NOCTURNE AT WABEDO CREEK BRIDGE

This bridge has always smelled of tar
pungent, even under dew.
When cars come, they
creep across
like cautious hounds, sniffing.

I ease down the embankment,
hear slow water
contour sand and soft mud.
There are fireflies. Their green tendrils
stagger out of steam and
sharp grass around me.

Among straight, waxy shoots of willow
my dry snarl loosens, deep-breathing cool
mist off the creek.

Overhead, a bat's thin leather
gleans the air for insects.
Lightning pulses
behind cloudcover.
Somehow, flat and high,
there are stars.

WADING THE WILLAMETTE WITH REBECCA

She asks if I've lived
near mountain streams, if I've known
the surge beneath the surface.
No. I am new to the Willamette,
knowing only lowland rivers, slow-moving
quick to warm.

Before leaving land, she cautions
that the current's always faster
than it looks, the stones
always slipperier than they feel.

I watch her hike up calico skirt, clutch
the wet hem, walk through curling eddies
into whitewater. I hear her enter
the river's rush, bare shoulders
strumming long hair.
As she plants her way
toward a brush and gravel island,
I cling to green rock, numb
from snowmelt.

Waist-deep, she turns, says the river
is too fast, too deep to cross.

On the bank, trickling our fingers
over warm pebbles, we talk of rivers:
the current we make, the sensation of crossing.
We wonder what it'd be like
to forget our lovers,
ride the water between smooth boulders
and claim that island as our own, let the runoff
clean our fibers,
weave them into cloth.

DURING OUR MOVE FROM MINNESOTA TO NEW YORK,
 WE STOP IN SAXON HARBOR, WISCONSIN,
 AND FEEL THE UNCERTAINTY OF EVERYTHING

From any stool
 in the Harbor Lights Bar
 you can look
 into the black hole
 of Lake Superior
 and see red and green lights
 slipping from their orbits

We sit with strong coffee, watch
 the soft bartender, his wife
 and their daughters
 drawing careful beers,
 frying food

Here, the locals swap their latest
 coho stories, laugh
 like nylon, flapping,
 then stop for the crackling
 lake report from shortwave

In the clear, latesummer mornings
 the bartender's youngest daughter
 walks miles along the shoreline
 picking wet pebbles,
 wave-ground glass, concretions
 uncovered by rhythm

We watch her playing now
 near the pool table,
 how she keeps banded agates bright
 in a dish of water,
 holds them, one at a time
 under the dim yellow light

(stanza break)

Tomorrow, while walking the shore
we will find
no striped stones, no smooth
blue glass to calm our hands

We'll dismantle the flimsy tent, pack
what little we have
into the car, and leave
the lake to swallow all sound

WABEDO THAW

Walking the bouldered shore
between dormant hill and
honeycomb ice,
I hear the tension
of a stringed instrument
give.

The April wind divides the solid,
confusing it from every side.
All will be cold water in four days.

Last year's reeds stand on the point,
undisturbed by the shifting,
around each brown shaft
a follicle of clear.

From under stones
a spring
dribbles deltas of orange ore
over the brittleness.

Uphill, the wind plummets
through rigid birch
into the muffling ground.
There, blue jays are screeching.

LAKE SPIRIT

Early summer
cuts with a clear knife.
Muskellunge
emerges from deepest green,
sliding the cold from her entrails.

The lake ripens,
heavy with bloom.
Muskellunge
rolls the hot topwater,
belly curving white,
slimy-smooth,
drunk from the stillness.

By August
there are no more questions.
Perch are everywhere.
Her belly is full.
Cabbageweed
turns shallow bays red
as the lake rests,
exhausted.

I know the silence held below waves,
the haze layering morning.
Take what you need.

IN THE NARROWS

I pole into pads
 and anchor like their yellow lilies
 floating thick
 petal fingers
 over the clarity of noon

Young perch
 pin-glint in shallows
 My thoughts school
 down
 where sunfish
 hide
 in brown
 weeds

One comes up
 leery thin
 to suck
 a bug
 from the surface

A breeze
 locates my boat
 rotating it
 on anchorrope axis

I am left
 to flick time hot ants
 onto water

CREEK

A creek weaves through bogmeadow
 revealing everything
 down to muck
 and last year's wild rice
 laid like silage on the bottom

The air pushes
 tightly, through a mesh
 of dragonflies
 crackling brittle wing
 against wing

Redwing blackbirds
 tangle into bulrushes
 roll tongues
 over the long afternoon

During a dry spell
 a yearling pike
 will stray from the lake
 and lose itself among the pads
 and short weeds of the creek
The sun so close there
 and the fish
 wide-eyed
 spooked by its thin shadow
 will chase fry
 until death rolls it
 against the floating bank

HERON DANCER

Blue heron
 in the shallows
 whose feet
 and my senses
 simultaneously touch down

Whose back
 ripples
 like fine sand
 beneath wave
 over it
 rests the dusk
 of my hands

She strides
 wakeless silent
 along the haze of shoreline

My throat tongue and lips
 Your crest long legs and nape

The hollow
 bones of a bird
 float down the calm
 dark waters
 of my throat

WALKING ALONG THE RED RIVER,
 PREOCCUPIED BY LIMITS

Winter has no stillness. I remember
 how we turned back the folds
 of our sod that spring, found
 white rhizomes sprouting in the fertile soil.
 We heaved big sticks into the river's
 moving parts, watched your black spaniel
 paddle across, snorting mouthfuls of mud,
 bark and tongue. That spring, grassy mounds
 gave our bodies their contour.

The river's loose warp still twists between these banks,
 a narrowing white ribbon
 where sound diminishes to one skier
 slicking down the twilight turnings of ice.
 His progress engages me momentarily,
 but I return to my own: my boots
 making the ground creak, air
 entering and leaving my lungs.

On these early January evenings, I try
 to create comfort: the deepening
 blue vein on a pale temple; the blue
 stars in constellation; branches and trunks
 broken by last year's flood,
 sunk into the clefts of large trees.

We often followed the trails along the floodplain
 where massive elms, ash and cottonwood root deeply in.
 Our time swarmed like hundreds of box elder beetles
 falling from sweaty leaves, their red and black bodies
 grappling through wet, silky fur.

I smell you now, your pungent sweat. I remember
 the smell, the taste of your sex, of our skin
 burrowing hollows in each other. The hours
 we watched sheets of water shred themselves over the dam.

(stanza break)

Winter has frozen it solid. Upstream,
rough fish bump sluggishly in thick water.
The Northern Lights no longer mean eyes,
water, or sex. Tonight, below zero, they mean only
this dome of sky, and the steady speed light
travels against it.

FOR SOMEONE I HAVE NOT YET MET

with the first kiss
the last word vanishes
--Luis Rocha

It will begin
when your hands, round and thick,
find skin stretched
over sternum and slight muscle.

They learn the places I hide--
pale contours, the bowed current
running between ribs, the sharp
shoulder blade snag.

Close now, the fingertips find
my knobby line of vertebrae,
a line a child might leave,
pebbles across an empty lot.

And when those hands meet,
pressing together and down
against the pebbles,
I am that child, warm from running home.

NOCTURNE WITH BATS AND WALLEYE

This is our ritual.
The old man and I
fish walleye
when waves, weary of their own repetition,
sink deep.

Six boats dangle over the middle reef
waiting for the feeding to begin,
for cold hard teeth
to puncture a certain hunger, and moonopal eyes
to move over rocks.
One by one, they reach home
empty-handed.

And the bats come, out of the swampy hollow
where they sleep inside dead trees.
Over the water now, around us,
their damp encroachment:
delicate flappings
skimming the surface where the mind works,
snatching mosquitoes away from the darkness
with macabre mouths.

The old man fishes straight down,
feeding the night a final minute.
Soon,
we too will drop from this precarious reef
and close the distance
over water.